DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 387 CE 007 123

AUTHOR Bruce, Robert L.
TITLE Value Orientations of a Low-Income Rural Audience. Paths Out of Poverty: Working Paper No. 20. Preliminary Report.
INSTITUTION State Univ. of New York, Ithaca. Coll. of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell Univ.
PUB DATE Jun 75
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Adult Education Research Conference (Toronto, Ontario, April, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classification; Communication Problems; Ethical Values; Field Interviews; *Low Income Groups; *Personal Values; Research Methodology; *Rural Population; *Social Values; Tape Recordings; Values
IDENTIFIERS *Northeast Regional Research Project NE 68

ABSTRACT

Tape recorded interviews, loosely structured to elicit reactions to giving and receiving help, conducted in 118 low-income households in Yates County, New York, were analyzed for value statements. Value listings and categories were adjusted to accommodate the observed data. Noted were 35 positive and 17 negative values. Twelve combinations of two or more positive or negative values were formed and treated as separate values. The final list of values and the number and proportion of interviews in which each was identified is presented in tabular form. A large percentage of the interviews revealed values on thrift (mentioned by all but one respondent), on family, and on health. In contrast to more conventional values, making use of available sources of aid elicited a high proportion of favorable mentions, while status in the eyes of others and conforming personal appearance and conduct were given moderately low position. The results indicate a high degree of realism on the part of the poor and suggest that they might tolerate or respect approaches which do not gloss over that reality with euphemisms. Methodologically, the study demonstrates that it is possible to derive reliable and highly useful data from the analysis of loosely-structured interviews. Appended are sample interview questions. (Author/MS)

PATHS OUT OF POVERTY

Working Paper Series

Working Paper No. 20 June, 1975

VALUE ORIENTATIONS OF A LOW-INCOME RURAL AUDIENCE

by

Robert L. Bruce
Department of Education
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York 14853

Preliminary report of research funded in part by Northeast Regional Research Project NE-68

VALUE ORIENTATIONS OF A LOW-INCOME RURAL AUDIENCE

Robert L. Bruce

Professor of Extension Education

New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

June, 1975

VALUE ORIENTATIONS OF A LOW-INCOME RURAL AUDIENCE

Robert L. Bruce

It is not unusual for specialists and institutions to devise what seem to them to be well-conceived, rational plans for the development of a low-income audience, only to receive little positive response from the "client" group. The technology for change may be available, and there may be no insuperable problems of capital formation or availability. In these cases, failure to induce change is frequently attributed to a "lack of communication."

There may, indeed, be a failure of communication, but one of a different sort than is often assumed. Besides the frequently assumed problems of failure of the message to reach the audience or to be understandable to it, we must consider the possibility that the message is received and understood but is rejected. Rejection may result from a lack of desire for change, or from the fact that the values implied in the methods are foreign to or rejected by the audience.

The communicator, according to George Herbert Meade, must assume the attitude of the other individual as well as calling it out in the other. The result of the communicator's "thinking and conversing between himself and the generalized other" is a strategy based on his assumptions about the behavior and values of his audience. What strategy would a poor person develop if he or she had to do the same thing? If the poor

---

This paper is based on New York State Project 370, a contributing project to Northeast Regional Project NE-68, New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences--a statutory unit of Cornell University.

person is subjected to an environment totally different from that of the would-be communicator, will his or her information-processing strategies match the expectations of the communicator? Are there consistent choice behavior systems (values) to be found in rural life or among the rural poor, and do these cause rejection of messages which seem perfectly proper and attractive to the communicator?

This study proceeds from the assumption that the proper place to begin the answer to the above question is with the people directly involved -- the intended audience.

The Parent Studies

The parent study, of which this study is a part, was originally designed as part of a comprehensive regional research effort, NE-68, Paths Out of Poverty, with overall objectives of finding out why community and governmental services had not enabled families to climb out of impoverishment, and to arrive at a general theoretical framework and body of knowledge that would guide the development of more effective programs.

To that end, it was the purpose of this project to determine whether discrepancies exist between the communication rhetoric of intervention programs and the values and needs of the impoverished audience.

Following an extensive search of the literature and an examination of a variety of Cooperative Extension publications from various states, explicitly designed and rated as potentially effective with low-income audiences, a preliminary study was designed and carried out in 1970.

The preliminary study, reported elsewhere [1], made use of a structured interview eliciting responses to specific ideas and recommendations gleaned from the extension publications studies and to the rationales underlying the recommendations. Data were also collected on respondents' self images. Respondents in the preliminary study were families taking part in the Vermont Farm Family Program.

When tape recordings of the interviews were reviewed by the researchers and by naive observers, it was apparent that while good rapport was apparently attained, answers were conditioned by the assumptions built into the questions. The decision was then taken to devise a less structured situation in which the respondent would be led to talk about the problems faced by the poor, their responses to those problems, and considerations involved in giving and responding to advice about those problems.

The evolution of the method used has been described in detail elsewhere[2]. Briefly, it involved a loose interview schedule administered in the home to low-income respondents selected by a process of successive nomination to avoid association of the interviewers with social service or educational agencies. The interviews were conducted by members of the respondent group, and all were tape recorded. The interview recordings form the basis for this study. The interviews were carried out in 145 households during the summer of 1971.

---

[1] Jack A. Barwind and Robert L. Bruce. "Paths out of Poverty: A Pilot Survey" Paper presented at Annual Conference of American Association of Agricultural Editors, Cornell University, 1970.

[2] Ivette Puerta and Robert L. Bruce. Data Collection with Low-Income Respondents. Department of Education, New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. 36 pp, Multigraphed.

Theoretical Considerations

This study proceeds from the assumption that the response of an individual to a message depends upon his processing of that message. Upon receiving the message the individual receiving it assigns meanings to it, makes judgments about the nature of the action called for and makes judgments about the response which he should make to the message. The outcome of these judgments will be influenced by the criteria used and by the order and method of their application.

It has been conventional for studies of communication to focus on the transmission and receipt of the message and on the capacity on the recipient to assign meanings to the message received. Comparatively less attention has been given to the criteria for judgment of the message by the recipient. It is on this latter element that this study focuses.

Values

Values have been defined as important conceptual aspects of life condition considered by the individual as essential to his well being with situations devised to represent those values.[3] "We are concerned with values as observable variables of human conduct, not with an appraisal of various values being as better or wrose than others nor with the meaning and ontological status of value as a concept, however,

[3]Asahel D. Woodruff. "Concept Value Theory of Human Behavior". Unpublished paper from files of Cornell University Testing Center, Undated.

important these problems may be."[4] In general they have been defined as standards, that which is desired, that which is desirable.

In the context of this study, values provide the criteria by which messages are judged. Hence they serve as a sort of screen through which communications must pass. The capacity of the communicator or communicating system to predict the nature of this screen will greatly affect their capacity to develop effective messages.

The following assumptions served as a framework for this study:

a. The practicality and improvisation behavioral tendencies of the rural poor indicate the functioning of "protestant ethic" values. The poor were expected to be constant maximizers with cognitive strength fostered by their poverty.

b. The Douglah-Roycraft[5] and Rushing[6] conclusions about farm wo s, were also expected to prove to be true with the non-farm rural poor: "Rural people who live under what are generally considered deprived conditions do not necessarily perceive

---

[4]Robin M. Williams, Jr., American Society, New York: Knopf, 1960.

[5]Mohammed Douglah and R. F. Roycraft. "Studying the Low-Income Family" Juar Coop. Ext. V (Fall, 1967), 164-170.

[6]William A. Rushing. "Objective and Subjective Aspects of Deprivation in a Rural Poverty Class." Rural Sociology, 33 (1968) 269.

themselves as being deprived, nor do they perceive other families in the community as being deprived." Rushing suggests that "it is perhaps against rural peoples' values to admit conditions of poverty, or that present criteria used for differentiating high and low social economic groups are not applicable to rural areas."

c. The value framework of the communicator and rural poor respondent may differ, though not necessarily to the degree that it would hamper the receiving of messages. The values of the receiver might, however, hamper achievement of the purpose of the message, which is to promote change. This may be true because (1) the action called for may be contrary to the values of the audience; (2) the promised results of the action may be contrary to the values of the audience; or (3) the promised results of the action may have no value to the audience.

d. The value differences might also affect communication strategy preferences, both from communicator to respondent and vice versa.

Methodological Considerations

According to Solomon[7] choice behavior seems to be the best available indicator of values:

[7] Darwin D. Solomon. "Value Factors in Migration: Rural Residence Values Associated with Rural to Urban Migration" Unpublished Ph.D thesis, Cornell University, 1957.

1. Choice self behavior (what I do - how I resolve this problem)
2. Choice other behavior (what she does - how she handles her problem)
3. Verbalize ideal other choice behavior (what she should do - advice)
4. What is essential for my well being (my choice behavior - what I should do, etc.)
5. Justification for behavior (why I do it)

Probably the most valid method of observing and recording choice behavior is through participant observation over long periods of time in which the target of the observation has ample opportunity to exercise choices and to express judgments of the actual choices of others. Since this luxury is not often present, it is usually necessary to elicit choices more directly through interviews or other artificial techniques. Where direct observation of natural behavior cannot be achieved, however, it is still desirable, so far as possible, to give the respondents maximum opportunity to define the situations and to mention spontaneously what behaviors they believe to be right in those circumstances.

"(Man) gives evidence of his needs or values whenever he spontaneously puts his thoughts into words. (There is) a tendency for a person to think about what is related to his own needs and values, and to preserve his world in terms of those values."[8] Any study on values is best achieved when the respondent has freedom to evaluate and propose the

[8] White, p. 62-63

problem situation, preferential behavior, and the circumstances, without any infiltration, suggestion, or direction from the interviewer.[9]

These views of the nature of values and the ways in which they can best be identified had been confirmed by the earlier experience of the investigator.[10] This experience led to the use of a very loosely structured open-ended interview in which the interviewee was presented, not with a question about values, but with a situation to which he or she could react -- the value orientations were derived from analysis of the reaction to the situation.

Earlier experience[11] had indicated that interviewees did not appear to be distracted by the presence of unobtrusive--but not hidden--tape recorders. This was confirmed in most cases in this instance, and 118 tape recorded interviews conducted by peers of the respondents were used as the basis for this analysis.

PROCEDURE

The 145 household interviews collected as described above were screened to eliminate those in which the interviewer was an "outsider," those in which the respondent was obviously led by the interviewer in his or her responses, and those which had for some reason proven to be rudimentary. A few further interviews were lost due to cassette damage in an earlier transcription, leaving a total of 118 for analysis.

---

[9] Solomon, op cit.

[10] Barwind and Bruce, op. cit.

[11] Barwind and Bruce, op.cit.

Four of the interviews were selected initially for detailed analysis. These were chosen more or less at random to provide an initial view of what could be expected. A research assistant reviewed each interview several times, noting all statements that could be interpreted as expressions of values. The statements were reviewed and tentative classifications were derived to serve as a rough guide to further classification.

Using the tentative listing and classification of value statements as a guide, the remaining interviews were reviewed by three research assistants. Frequent conferences were held among the reviewers and the author to check for and resolve differences in handling particular items and to revise the categories to better accommodate the data. The value listing and categories were regarded as subject to adjustment throughout, and no attempt was made to force statements into pre-existing categories.

In addition to creating new value categories and revising value titles, it was necessary to add negative values. These were used where the expression was specifically negative rather than being merely an absence of a positive value.

An additional list of values was created where two or more on the original list seemed to be logically related and capable of treatment as a single value.

RESULTS

A total of 35 positive values and 17 negative values were noted. In addition, 12 combinations of two or more positive or negative values were formed and treated as values in their own right. The final list of values and the number and proportion of interviews in which each was identified is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Values Identified in Interview Responses
118 Low-Income Households, Yates Co., N.Y.

Positive Values	Frequency mentioned at least once in interview	
	No.	%
1.1 Family as an emotional unit	68	57.6
1.2 Family as a legal unit	35	29.7
1.3 Family as a Demographic unit	50	42.4
2.1 Feels good to be clean	39	33.1
2.2 Cleanliness as a virtue	15	12.7
3.1 thrift as an end in itself	99	83.9
3.2 Thrift as a means of safety	46	39.0
3.3 Advanced planning for future needs	79	66.9
4.1 Status maintenance - Acceptance by peers	38	32.2
4.2 Status elevation	31	26.2
4.3 Acceptance as person	9	7.6
5.1 Meeting obligations and expectations of others	48	40.7
5.2 Self Discipline	42	35.6
5.3 Maintaining order in family or home	62	52.5
5.4 Providing for family	14	11.9
6.1 Tendency to be hopeful	11	9.3
6.2 Not giving up	79	66.9
7.1 Material comfort	50	42.4
7.2 Possessions as status	4	3.4
7.3 Compensation -- I deserve it	5	4.2
8.1 Health as state of being	39	33.1
8.2 Facilitators of good health	75	63.6
8.3 Avoid poor health	37	31.4
9.1 Care of property or belongings	39	33.1
9.2 Pride in belongings	29	24.6
10.1 Acceptance of aid	85	72.0
10.2 Independence	42	35.6

Table 1. Values Identified in Interview Responses
118 Low-Income Households, Yates Co., N.Y.
(Continued)

Positive Values		Frequency mentioned at least once in interview	
		No.	&
11.1	Security -- Things you can rely on	18	15.3
12.1	Physical Appearance -- good grooming	41	34.7
12.2	Outward Behavior -- public conduct	39	33.1
13.1	Conformity to sex role	20	16.9
14.1	Birth control	6	5.1
15.1	Education	20	16.9
16.1	Work Ethic	35	29.7
17.1	Currency--keeping up with what is going on	18	15.3

Negative Values		Frequency mentioned at least once in interview	
		No.	&
1.2	Family as legal unit	1	.8
1.3	Family as Demographic unit	3	2.5
2.1	Cleanliness feelings	1	.8
4.1	Status maintenance	3	2.5
4.2	Status elevation	6	5.1
4.3	Being equal	1	.8
5.1	Social Expectations	3	2.5
6.1	Optimism	1	.8
6.2	Giving up	5	4.2
7.1	Material comfort	6	5.1
7.2	Status items	3	2.5
10.1	Dependence	17	14.4

Table 1. Values Identified in Interview Responses
118 Low-Income Households, Yates Co., N.Y.
(Continued)

Negative Values		Frequency mentioned at least once in interview	
		No.	&
12.1	Physical appearance	1	.8
12.2	Public conduct	1	.8
13.1	Sex role conformity	1	.8
14.1	Birth control	3	2.5
16.1	Work ethic	1	.8

Value Combinations		No.	&
1.0	ANY Family values	93	78.8
3.0	ANY Thrift values	117	99.2
3.4	Thrift as means of safety or advanced planning for future	95	80.5
3.5	Thrift as an end in itself, or care of property	101	85.6
4.4	Status maintenance, or status elevation	52	44.1
4.5	Status maintenance, and outward behavior	12	10.2
5.0	ANY Responsibility values	92	78.0
5.6	Maintaining order in family or home, or family as legal unit	80	67.8
6.0	ANY Optimism values	80	67.8
8.0	ANY Health values	94	79.7
10.3	Negative acceptance of aid, or independence	54	45.8
12.3	Outward behavior, or self discipline	60	50.8

It is not surprising that values concerning thrift receive frequent mention from these low-income respondents, since both the circumstances of their lives and the context of the study would be likely to reinforce concerns in that area. Only one respondent of the 118 failed to mention me value in the thrift area, and such values were identified 500 times in the 118 interviews. Thrift as an end in itself received 265 mentions in 99 interviews, and a value on planning against future needs was expressed 153 times in 79 interviews. Either thrift as a means of safety or planning for the future was expressed by 95 respondents, and 101 cited either thrift as an end in itself or responsible care of property as desirable ends.

Ninety-three of the interviews revealed a value on one or more of the three "family" items, 94 included value statements related to health, and 92 place a value on one or more aspects of responsibility.

In marked contrast to the above values, all of which are generally accepted as being impeccably middle-class, is the stress on making use of available resources or aid. Eighty five of the respondents made statements indicating a positive value on this point, and it was mentioned 194 times. This value also received the largest number of negative mentions, being mentioned adversely 21 times in 17 interviews.

Somewhat lower on the scale come the items dealing with status in the eyes of peers or of the world. Even combining these two items yields mentions in only 52 interviews. Personal appearance and conformity in public conduct also receive moderately low position as do health and cleanliness items.

Material possessions as a source of comfort received mention in 50 interviews, but possessions as a source of status or as compensation for other hardships received the lowest number of mentions of any of the positive values, (4 and 5, respectively).

DISCUSSION

Any consideration of these limited findings should be given with caution, bearing in mind the limitations of the methodology involved. First, the sources of data were not selected randomly and hence cannot be taken as representative of the range, even of the low-income population of Yates County, much less low-income people in general. Second, the interviews used as the basis for the analysis, while relatively unstructured, were nonetheless about the problems of low-income people and inevitably had an economic bias. No attempt was made to explore systematically the whole range of concerns of the respondents.

In spite of these cautions, these data have real value. They are not speculations--however logical--by experts, nor are they set responses to questions biased by preconceptions. Within the limits cited above, they are spontaneous. They represent real concerns as felt by the real people who have them. Further, the process of successive nomination by which families were selected for interview yielded the genuine rural poor who often do not appear on the agency rosters from which more systematic samples are drawn.

What do they tell us? The dominant picture conveyed (and reinforced, incidentally, by the interviews as a whole) is one of realism. Thrift is a necessary value as an end in itself and as defense against an

uncertain and risky future. Property must be cared for, but is not likely to be a source of pride or status. Maintaining good health and meeting social and family obligations can also be ways of coping.

There is apparently little room for pride. While some are ambivalent about dependency, it is seen as proper to make use of resources which are available for that purpose. Appearance--either of self or of conduct--get relatively few mentions, and being regarded as an equal gets even fewer.

Several of the less frequently mentioned values deserve further comment. Nothing in the interviews was even peripherally structured to elicit responses concerning sex role conflicts, education, or staying current. Yet each of these concerns was apparently important enough to be mentioned in almost a fifth of the interviews. Indeed, one interview contains a discussion (by a woman) of the relation between sex role expectations and alcoholism in men that would do credit to a professional in the field.

With respect to communications directed at the poor, there would seem to be a clear implication that emphasis on thrift and risk reduction would be persuasive and that failure to rate favorably on those values would probably destroy credibility. Appeals to status and pride of self or, of possessions are not likely to be persuasive in and of themselves.

It may be more important to note the realism of the value structure. In a culture that treats poverty as something vaguely shameful, to be dealt with euphemistically, if at all, it is common to approach the subject only indirectly. These data suggest that the poor would tolerate, and might respect, approaches which are more in tune with the reality in which they live.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The process of listening carefully and perceptively to hour after hour of taped interviews is not easy. The author is indebted to E.Patrick Alleyne, D.B. Brown, Leta Livoti, and Simeon Slovacek for their effort and their thoughtful contributions. Special mention should also be made of Ms. Ivette Puerta, who oversaw the data collection.

APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The interview schedule used in this study is too long for easy reproduction. The series which follows will give the flavor of the interviews.

Now, think of the poorest family you know, the one that's been having the hardest time. Don't tell me the name--just think of it in your mind. We are going to be talking about advice to them now.

What are the three biggest problems the mother has in that family?

Which one of these have you had some experience with that can help her?

How would you help her work out this problem?

What kind of advice would you give the mother on the best way to handle it?

If she asks you why that's the best way, what would you tell her?

What if she asks why? What should I tell her?

What would you tell her is the worst way to handle it?

Why is that the worst way?

Which advice (of the ones you've given her to help her) is the most important for her to know?

Why would you say that?

How would you go about meeting her and getting her to listen to you. (Getting her to change.) What would you say to her? What would she say to you?

Would you change if someone explained it to you like that?

What wouldn't you say to her? What are some things you definitely would not say to her?

Why?

Interview Questions

If she wanted to do it her way and you were trying to help her so you have to change her mind about the way she's doing it. . . how would you go about it? What would you tell her? What would she say to you?

On Buying Food

a. What are the most important things you'd want to know about?

Why has that been important to know?

And if you can't get that--then what?

Who, where or what would give you the information?

Who else? . . . or what else?